

Ilea staggered back once more, watching the fragment's movements. She could tell now, the minute pauses between attacks, the rhythmic pulsing of its magic, its very life.

Here it comes, she thought, another spell released as it arced towards her. It felt like a part of the creature's body came and attacked her, vanishing as soon as it burned through her ash.

The past hours had been more effective at training her Lightning resistance than weeks with Trian had been. The difference Avatar of Ash brought was massive.

She could always deactivate her Ashen Armor to receive a significant amount of damage more than before but her body was tough even without it. The difference Avatar of Ash made, specifically to magic damage, was more significant than her armor.

The main benefit was of course the pure magical damage that slammed into her with each spell, its full potential unleashed and thus flowing into her resistance skill, instead of any other defensive abilities she had.

Ilea tried catching the creature after a while, finding herself outmatched in both teleportation and speed.

'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10'

Ilea felt that adding poison to the mix, especially the full damage without a resistance would be too dangerous. Her wounds would need to be healed with her third tier recovery, using up quite a bit more mana than otherwise.

It was likely safe but the environment was not familiar to her. Should more of the creatures or something more powerful and unknown suddenly show up, she didn't want to be caught with a third of her health missing and at half her mana.

The training did get a little boring however, enticing her to try and catch or damage the beast that had burnt up her very skin and muscles for the past hours.

It proved difficult. The creature seemed to have some sort of spherical perception as well, avoiding all her ashen limbs with ease, keeping itself at a distance even from the ashen mist that Ilea tried to move around it.

A combination of spears, mist and limbs finally grazed the creature, mana intrusion sending a bit of Ilea's destructive energy into the thing.

She watched as the fragment tumbled a little, its body sizzling where it had been hit. One second later, it dissipated entirely.

“What?” Ilea asked into the empty space. There had been no kill notification or anything else.

She heard a loud crackling noise in the distance, a low rumble following.

Time suddenly seemed to stand still, Ilea blinking out of the cavern and activating her resistance once more. The corruption started to be removed from her body as she turned and watched.

Even with her magical light resistance, she had to squint her eyes as a bolt of pure lightning cut through the stone from the other side of the cavern.

The bolt of volatile energy thrummed with power, reaching where she had been a moment earlier before it turned and rushed at her.

Fuck.

The spell moved towards her as if her perception wasn't slowed at all, burning through her wings, the small wall of ash and her armor in an instant.

A crack formed on her bone armor before the energy spread through her body, locking her in place for a moment as all her organs burst.

She blinked her eyes, her sight blurry. Her body had restored itself with her third tier reconstruction but she was pretty sure her brain had been fried for a fraction of a second.

'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11'

A single spell... shit, she thought, realizing she had lost around three thousand points of health in the attack.

Her eyes squinted once more, ashen armor reforming as her wings spread again and stabilized her fall.

The creature appeared, a ball of energy exuding outwards, wisps of lightning cracking at the air around.

It spread its wings and looked at Ilea.

[Young Lightning Elemental – lvl ???]

A wingspan of around six meters, bright blue feathers adorning their whole length. The main body only reached around two meters, a little taller than Ilea herself. Its eyes were wisps of white light, a trail of energy left behind as it moved. A long blue tail like protrusion moved through the air behind it.

Ilea saw the attack coming, her precognition just barely enough to recognize it. She blinked and sped up, the lightning arcing in the air but flying past and crashing into stone, a ripple of blue light shredding into the cliff side.

She dived and twirled, trying to get as much solid matter and distance between herself and the elemental. Ilea curled up suddenly, her wings moving up as she changed directions. Lightning streaked past, burning halfway through her armor.

It's keeping up, she noted and glanced back, seeing the fast moving blue bird around fifty meters behind. A part of her armor was freezing up, the cold winds washing past her as she descended. She dodged two more streaks of lightning, one of them clipping a wing.

Ilea barely dodged the next attack, blinking out of the way in the last possible moment. She felt when they were coming, saw them advance in her sphere but the difference in projectile speed and her own maneuverability was too high nonetheless. The distance between them didn't matter much either, the lightning homing in on her in the last several meters, even partially following after she blinked.

The huge cliff sides provided cover at least, powerful lightning strikes that would put most natural occurrences to shame cut into the stone, chunks of rock splintering outwards and falling into the abyss.

Ilea maneuvered through the tight passages with all the speed she could muster. She used her ashen limbs to round corners without losing momentum, something the increased density allowed for rather easily.

She created ashen mist and spears. Aimed at the elemental, both to obstruct its view and to damage it outright.

The monster dodged her attacks and teleported through the sections filled with ashen mist, either cautious or suggesting its vulnerability.

Ilea failed to dodge another three strike attack, getting hit by the last one. This time, she wasn't completely burnt up, only taking about two thousand damage to her health that healed again instantly, using mana gained from the attack itself.

Her wings were reforming as she fell, a trail of smoke from her burnt skin following. She released Heart of Cinder, aimed at the creature. More so to be rid of the damaging heat than to hit it outright, grinning when she saw the bird teleport to the side, slamming into the cliff wall.

It screeched in pain and charged up.

Ah, that's worse, Ilea thought and felt her body unable to move.

'ding' 'You have heard the enraged screech of a Young Lightning Elemental – You are paralyzed for five seconds'

'ding' 'Veteran reaches lvl 16'

She couldn't do anything but watch as a five meter wide cone of white energy spiraled down and hit her, a split second later.

Her regeneration at least didn't stop working, an internal skill after all. Ilea's body reformed three times during the effect of the spell, her skull and ribs exposed during the first cycle. She was glad that she could absorb a large chunk of the mana used, otherwise she would certainly not remain as comfortably topped off.

'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12'

The spell continued on for another ten seconds, Ilea remaining within as she regenerated, tumbling further down to give the elemental the impression that she was being damaged. In reality, she was simply using the attack to get some distance between them.

This is actually..., the thought paused as her brain popped, ... *some good training.*

Ilea dodged the rock formations extending from the cliff walls but nonetheless slammed into some of them, the damage negligible with all her shock absorption and general resilience.

She blinked once more when the spell ended, seeing the elemental hadn't exactly stayed still to deliver it but had certainly fallen behind. While her lightning resistance could certainly use the training, this was beyond anything she had encountered before.

Ilea hadn't tested with her newfound abilities but she was pretty sure the arcane storms raging in the north weren't as powerful as what this creature was putting out. A force of raw magic, an elemental of lightning and a young one at that, rendering all her layered defenses useless.

She wasn't even sure her regeneration could hold up against the creature if they faced each other in open space. For now, she focused on the fact that the monster wasn't corrupted and had apparently killed one of the tainted Wyverns that had come down into this layer.

A defender of the outside world, certainly more capable of destruction than Ilea herself. The itch of course, remained. Her will to face the creature, to actually go in close and slam her fist into its magical skull.

She knew it was futile. Even the fragment had managed to dodge nearly all her attacks. This one wouldn't just dissipate if she managed a hit. It would enrage and throw all of its natural and raw power into ripping her apart.

That fact of course only made her want to go and fight it even more so. Her mission and the people she promised help prevailed however, neither a dead Ilea nor a dead Lightning Elemental helping anybody in this scenario.

As long as it remained here, guarding the tenth layer and burning away all the corruption that tried to escape from further below.

The abyss slowly cleared as she flew further down, now having to dodge the normal bolts again, grazed and hit from time to time. Caves opened up and dozens if not hundreds of burnt and scattered corpses littered the ground.

Corruption gleamed in the crystal light, proving Ilea's suspicion and easing her decision to get away. *Fucking hell... listen to all the people that care about you. Get the hell away from that thing.*

She landed hard, her body having just regenerated. The smell of burnt skin and corruption entered her nose as she blinked away, lightning slamming into the ground and ripping out stone, further scattering whatever creature's remains had occupied the space.

Ilea surveyed the area and found several tunnels, cracks in the stone that led somewhere else. *I've proven that I can take hits from it*, she thought and turned, moving close enough to one of the tunnels to be able to blink inside.

She formed walls of ash, tumbling back and impacting the stone from the first bolt, the second one landing at the same time as she did. Her body burnt up, her muscles convulsing as her eyes and organs popped.

A deep breath filled her newly formed lungs when another strike rolled over her. She regenerated and lay sizzling inside the crater she had formed in the cavern wall, her eyes focused forward as her ashen armor reformed.

She saw the creature land, a pulse of blue energy pushing away the scattered corpses. A chunk of brain matter and a leg splashed against an ashen wall.

The elemental stopped its attacks, its white eyes focused on her as it waited.

It's not charging an attack, Ilea was pretty sure of that, nothing about the creature suggesting an attack.

She moved out of the wall and cracked her neck, ashen limbs spreading behind her as she too waited. "What is it? Tired of attacking? Out of mana?" she asked, slowly stepping closer to the cave entrance.

The bird remained quiet, its head fixated on her.

Ilea checked her messages quickly, keeping an eye on her surroundings.

'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13'

'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14'

I really need to find more elementals to fight. Ah, I see..., she looked up and saw a dozen blue spots closing in quickly. They crashed into the creature, making it stagger forward a little with each small bird merging.

Ilea watched for a couple seconds longer, seeing the creature's feathers start brimming with energy, its form remaining the same size physically but commanding a presence different to before. She vanished the moment it opened its beak, hearing the screech from behind twenty meters of solid stone.

'ding' 'You have heard the screech of a Young Lightning Elemental – You are paralyzed for four seconds'

She heard three impacts in the stone, the ground shaking as tiny pebbles fell on her. A louder crash made the wall crack, white blue light enveloping her.

Ilea blinked as soon as she could, moving down through the caverns. The last hit was more powerful, lightning still sizzling through her. It was however the last hit, the creature not pursuing her any further.

Remaining in its lair and layer, Ilea was certainly happy about that, unsure if she could even damage it. *How many fragments remained that could empower it? Saved again by the magical borders of dungeons and the territorial nature of beasts.*

She decided that if she ever reached the power to face and best the elemental, she wouldn't kill it. It had made the message clear. A fuck off rather than a frenzied wish to kill her.

Ilea released her charged Heart of Cinder, the stone around her reduced to ash by the powerful spell. She sighed and looked up, to where the tunnel entrance lay.

Might just come back and annoy you. Or rather... one of the fragments. Only six levels remaining.

She trusted her instincts for now, feeling it unsafe to go back now and further provoke the powerful force of nature. Blinking twice, she came up on the stone separation leading to the eleventh layer and with it a drilled hole that allowed a person to get through.

A long cold and burnt out fireplace remained, empty wooden boxes and scraps of reddish cloth as well as marks of corruption and blood on the ground. She sniffed on it all, finding a variety that hadn't been present so far.

"The expedition?" she asked herself. There would be enough space here and the elemental as well as its remnants didn't seem to move down the tunnels. The entrance to the eleventh layer was

drilled, suggesting not all of them had a teleportation ability or they simply chose to err on the side of caution.

Drilling wasn't something her group would have done here. It could have been someone else as well of course but Ilea felt the ash in the fire had come to be in a somewhat recent time frame. A month ago, perhaps two.

Interesting... since when can I gauge the age of ash?

Ilea decided to trust it, her intuition that the feeling was reliable.

Either way, it could have been the expedition but it could have also been anybody else. A fire suggested that heat or light was necessary for whoever made it. *Or they just enjoy a good old bonfire, like I do.*

Something intelligent has come through here, that much I know.

She looked back once more before jumping through the hole and to the next layer.

Ilea landed thirty meters down in a pile of snow, sitting back as she took in the view.

Immediately, she forgot about the bonfire and the elemental she had just left behind, instead taking in the expansive snowed in valley before her.

Trees were visible in the distance, as well as some moving figures. Everything was cast in white, a thick layer of snow covering the whole layer. Her breath came out as a mist, something she couldn't suppress anymore with her Heart of Cinder.

She sat in the snow and smiled, the scene reminding her of Ravenhall and its surrounding mountains. *Alright, let's get on with it,* she mused and spread her wings, flying down the slope and towards the first moving thing she could recognize.

[Spirit of Winter – lvl 243]

Ilea slowed down and stopped, watching the creature turn as it noticed her. *Free of corruption. And not exactly a threat,* she noted and let its magic pass her resistances, using her sphere to move all the cold air towards her.

Spikes formed as the creature attacked, a whirlwind of ice and snow that cut into her exposed skin. Most of it was ineffective, despite the lack of ice resistance, the monster's level and damage output simply too low.

I need to find more if I want to level my Ice Resistance, she noted and slowly flew through the valley, spirit in tow.

She wasn't sure why exactly the creature attacked her, being a much lower level itself and not being attacked in the first place. Perhaps it saw heat or life itself as an enemy, something to be destroyed or well, cooled down.

She spotted an owl flying above about ten minutes later, diving down when it found a rabbit. Ilea watched the whole thing happen from a couple hundred meters away, reaching a hilltop in the process, ice still swirling around her.

Massive stone creatures moved in the distance, a frozen lake running along the side of their mountain. She spotted a group of winter spirits too, occupying a field of ice and snow. *My first destination.*

“Come on, let’s meet your brothers and sisters,” she spoke, looking at the spirit behind her, its face lacking any features or emotions. A specter of ice and winter.

“Don’t be so cold, friend,” she said and shook her head in mock disappointment. “The suns will rise again.”

She jumped down and moved her wings, landing amidst the group of spirits. “Welcome. It’s nice of you to help me with my training today,” she said and smirked, her armor receding to cover her chest and hips alone.